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A Study of
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by
Frank G. Odell

Reprinted from
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BY FRANK G. ODELL



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This paper was presented by invitation before the following conventions of telephone officials:

Ohio State Independent Telephone Association, Columbus, Ohio, Nov. 22, 1916.

United States Independent Telephone Association, Chicago, Dec. 8, 1916.

Nebraska Independent Telephone Association, Lincoln, Neb., Jan. 11, 1917.

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THE RURAL TELEPHONE IN EUROPE.

Address delivered before the United States Independent Telephone Association, Chicago, Dec. 8, 1916, by

FRANK G. ODELL

*Executive Secretary
National Conservation Congress.*

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First, to furnish a report upon government ownership of telephones and telegraphs for the Farmers' National Congress of the United States, the writer being chairman of a committee charged with that duty.

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ership now in preparation and from which quotations will be made.

The writer entered on this study with his prejudices all in favor of public ownership. By natural inclination and association with progressive and forward-looking men, he has inclined to such extension of the government functions of public service as may be profitably undertaken for the good of the public. If his prior views concerning public ownership may have been modified during the progress of this study, it is because of the force of irresistible and incontrovertible facts.

Public ownership in theory is one thing. The actual working of public ownership is quite another thing. The future of any great and necessary public utility under public ownership can only be properly forecasted by a survey of what has actually been done where it has been tried for years. Such has been the effort of the writer. It is hoped that this paper will present new and important facts for the consideration of the reader.

SCARCITY OF RURAL TELEPHONES ABROAD.

Remarkable as it may seem, the rural telephone service of those countries which have public ownership is developed to so limited an extent that it seems to be considered unworthy of notice in the official reports of most of such countries. Great Britain is the only exception to this rule. In this country a special effort has been made for the eight years prior to the present war to extend the telephone into the country districts. This effort is consecutively noted in several recent reports of the British postmaster-general under the heading, "Rural Party Lines—Farmers' Lines."

The extent to which this effort has succeeded is shown by the total of such telephones in service at the date of the last official report (March 31, 1915), namely, 2,265. This represents one telephone for each 4,290 of British rural population in the United Kingdom, as compared with a rural telephone development in the United States of one for each ten of population—or one telephone for each alternate farm family.

FARM TELEPHONES IN ENGLAND.

This remarkable development of the farm telephone in Great Britain—remarkable for its conspicuous failure to develop—is more noteworthy because it is based on a very reasonable rate, to-wit:

If the line connects three subscribers to the mile, each subscriber per year\$14.61

If the line connects two subscribers to the mile, each subscriber per year 17.05

When the efforts of the British postoffice department, offering as low a rate as this, can only secure 2,265 farmers as telephone users in eight years in all of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, there must be something inherently wrong in the British system.

Some of these inherent defects may be found in the interminable delay in securing installation of service, such as that noted by Hon. Mr. Goldsmith of the British parliamentary telephone committee, who called attention in a parliamentary debate on this subject to the fact that nine farmer applicants in Cornwall were still waiting for their telephones after

a lapse of three years from the date of filing their application.

When it is considered that the applicant for service in Great Britain must pay full rental for a year in advance, the state of mind of these Cornish farmers may be better imagined than described.

It is generally conceded that the British postoffice is the most efficient in the world. It should be, therefore, especially competent to work out the experiment of public ownership. The obligation to do this rests peculiarly upon the British government for the reason that the courts of that country have decided that "A telephone is a telegraph under the telegraph acts of 1863 and 1869, although the telephone was not in existence or contemplation when these acts were passed."

The government having thus arbitrarily declared and established a monopoly of wire communication to the exclusion of competition, the obligation to render service is doubly binding. It appears from the official records of that country that it has signally failed to meet this obligation, either from the standpoint of service rendered or of financial results attained.

The telephone system of the United Kingdom shows a deficit for the last year reported (1914-15) of \$540,657, while the deficit in telegraph operations for the seven years preceding 1914 amounts to \$30,659,444. Similar conditions as to losses in operation are to be found generally in the reports of government ownership countries.

EUROPEAN PERCENTAGES OF DEVELOPMENT.

The rarity of rural telephones in Great Britain and Continental Europe is worthy of more than passing notice. In order to make even the discouraging financial showing which is characteristic of publicly-owned utilities abroad, it is necessary to develop the service in urban districts. This is indicated by the facts as to percentages of telephone development.

The city of Paris alone has 32 per cent. of all the telephones in France. Vienna has 37 per cent. of all telephones in Austria, and Brussels has 37 per cent. of all telephones in Belgium. Rural development has been strangled for the sake of immediate revenue, which is in itself insufficient to develop the districts served on modern lines so that there is complaint all along the line.

Germany prides itself on taking care of its farmers, but after a ten-year struggle for revision of telephone rates, in which the government admitted frequently that small communities were unjustly discriminated against, all efforts proved futile and the old rates stand. Consequently, the farm telephone is practically unknown in Germany and no mention of this class of service is to be found in the official reports of that country.

Official statistics show that in the United States, the rural telephone rate averages from one-third to one-half the urban rate. In foreign countries, the rural rate is generally nearly as high as the urban rate. The inevitable tendency of this condition is to retard rural telephone development by making rural costs approximately city costs.

GOVERNMENT OWNERSHIP RESTRICTIONS.

In addition to this, government ownership countries usually impose burdensome line and service charges, still further hampering rural development. This is aptly illustrated by the following quotation from the report of the government ownership

committee of the Farmers' National Congress:

"Government Restrictions on Rural Telephone Service: Foreign telephone rate schedules, as generally quoted, do not indicate what the subscriber in rural districts actually has to pay for his telephone service. In addition to the scheduled rates there are extra charges based upon the length of the subscriber's line. In France, for example, the government furnishes free of charge only that portion of a rural telephone line which is located within $1\frac{1}{4}$ miles of the exchange to which the line is connected; the subscriber must contribute toward the cost of construction and toward the annual maintenance costs of all line beyond $1\frac{1}{4}$ miles from the exchange.

The contribution toward the cost of construction is at the rate of \$3.86 per 110 yards of line (metallic circuit). The annual contribution toward maintenance costs is at the rate of 39 cents per 110 yards of line (metallic circuit). The scheduled rates for local (exchange) service in rural districts consist of an annual subscription, or "ready to serve," charge which allows no outward calls

and a charge of two cents for each outward call. The annual subscription ("ready to serve") charge varies as follows:

First year	_____	\$19.30
Second year	_____	15.44
Third year	_____	11.58
Fourth and subsequent years	_____	7.72

When the additional line charges are taken into consideration, it is therefore evident that, in order to secure telephone service, the French farmer who lives three miles from a telephone exchange must pay as follows:

First year—\$138.30, plus two cents per outward local call.

Second year—\$26.36, plus two cents per outward local call.

Third year—\$22.50, plus two cents per outward local call.

Fourth and subsequent years—\$18.64, plus two cents per outward local call.

The rate of two cents per outward call, by itself, would appear to make the cost of rural telephone service in France prohibitive. An average of three outward calls per working day, or say 900 outward

calls per year, entails a charge as great as the average cost of complete telephone service in the United States. Moreover, the contributions toward the cost of construction and the annual maintenance costs of subscribers' lines cannot be divided among adjacent rural subscribers.

The independent form of farmers' co-operative or joint stock telephone associations which is common in the United States, is unknown under government ownership in Europe and is probably impossible under existing forms of governmental administration in European countries.

EXPERIENCE OF SWISS FARMERS.

In 1910 the Swiss government made a detailed inquiry into the telephone rates of that country. While this inquiry was in progress, the farmers of Switzerland thought it an opportune time to register a vigorous protest against the high line charges which the government imposed upon them—for in Switzerland, as in France, a rural subscriber must pay extra for that portion of his line which is beyond $1\frac{1}{4}$ miles from the exchange.

Acting at what appeared to be the

psychological moment, the Swiss Farmers' Association earnestly requested the government to abolish these extra line charges. In the report on the results of its rate inquiry, the government dismissed this request of the Farmers' association in the following language:

"The abolition of the extra charges for the portions of subscribers' lines beyond the free radius ($1\frac{1}{4}$ miles from the exchange), as required by the Swiss Farmers' Association, is made impracticable by important considerations. For one thing, such a measure is quite inopportune at the present time, when the question is to add to the revenues of the telephone administration by increasing certain of the rates.

"To show the importance of the request it may be mentioned that in the year 1909 the revenue from line charges amounted to about 445,000 francs (\$89,000). If these line charges are abolished, the consequent loss in revenue must be offset by a further increase in the annual subscription charges of about 15 francs (\$3). * * * Such a large general rate increase in the interests of a relatively small number of subscribers cannot be approved. * * * One cannot ask the administration to construct especially costly lines in the interest of a few subscribers unless correspondingly more revenue is received from them."

(Supplementary report of the federal council to the committee of the national council on the "Proposition to Increase Telephone Rates," March 21, 1911.)

It is not surprising, therefore, that the rural telephone development in Switzerland is so small that it is not deemed worthy of special classification in official reports of that country.

FRANCE'S RURAL TELEPHONES.

The logical effect of burdensome regulations of this nature is aptly illustrated by a brief study of the rural telephones in France:

Like Switzerland, Germany and other European countries, rural telephones are not specifically noted in the French reports. One may search them in vain for any clue to what is being done by the government of France to carry the science of communication to the farmer's door.

This is not to suggest that the French government is neglectful of the farmer, for it is not. The French farmer was borrowing money on 70 years' time at three and four per cent. interest before half the American states were admitted to the federal Union. Agriculture has been one

of the greatest concerns of the French government. One has but to reflect how her peasants paid the German war indemnity after the war of 1870 by the creation of the beet sugar industry, to understand that the government of France is not neglectful of the farmer.

But in France, as in other European countries, the telephone, like the telegraph, is of necessity a government monopoly in order to have all means of rapid communication under control of the government for military purposes. When Napoleon the Great developed the optical telegraph, he set in motion a train of militaristic influence which will never cease on the Continent until world-peace is assured by the new brotherhood of man.

The writer was so fortunate as to secure access to a telephone directory of France of the year 1914, listing in one volume, about the size of the Chicago telephone directory, every telephone subscriber in the French Republic outside the exchange area of Paris. This made possible a concentrated study of rural telephone development.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT COMPARISONS.

For this purpose, the Department of Aisne, in northern France, was selected, having a population of nearly 520,000. This department was, prior to the war, the best developed agricultural district of the republic. Any statistical results attained from this study will, therefore, be exceedingly favorable to the French rural telephone system as a whole.

Every telephone subscriber in this district was counted and carefully tabulated, segregating those engaged in agricultural pursuits. This district was then compared with the strictly rural county of Custer in central Nebraska, which has approximately the same geographical area. The results of this comparison are shown in the accompanying table:

COMPARISON OF TELEPHONE IN RURAL DISTRICTS IN UNITED STATES AND FRANCE.

	Dept. of Custer Aisne, County, France Neb.	
Area in square miles	2,860	2,588
Population	518,991	25,668
Total telephones	4,212	4,077
No. telephones per 100 population	0.81	15.88
No. farmers' tele- phones	452	2,527

Without taking into consideration the difference in population, Custer county has almost six times as many farmers' telephones as the Department of Aisne. In proportion to population, Custer county, Neb., has nearly 20 times the number of telephones in the Department of Aisne.

The foregoing examples illustrate the way in which rural telephone development is strangled in Europe. They might be extended in the experience of practically every European country. To the student who desires to base opinion on ascertained facts, these examples are a revelation of the limitations which inhere in the bureaucratic methods of old-world civilization.

The innate pride of the American citizen in his government leads to the belief that this beneficent institution which derives its powers from the people, is sufficient for any degree of public service. As to this, there may well be a large interrogation. Let us see:

GOVERNMENT OF THE PORK BARREL.

All theories of public ownership of telephones and telegraphs presuppose their management by the postoffice

department. The records of Congress abound with discussion to this effect. In all countries under government ownership, these utilities are thus managed. This leads most naturally to a brief consideration of the fitness of our postoffice department to undertake this function with prospect of success.

It is no part of the purpose of this discussion to berate the postoffice. This one great business department of the government has enough troubles with incompetent and wasteful congresses without increasing its burdens by destructive criticism. Suffice it to say, in passing, that before the postoffice department can successfully run a nation-wide telephone system, it must incorporate in its business organization a system of accounting which will show what it is doing with the money it now receives and expends.

Contrary to general opinion, such a system of accounting is not now and never has been in existence in this department. It may come some time, but until it does come and this great branch of the public service is divorced from politics and the whims of peripatetic congressmen, it will be as

well to confine its activities to its present functions.

The lack of business methods in the postoffice department is chiefly due to the perennial and eternal interference of Congress. The pork barrel is a glorified Statue of Liberty to the overage congressman and senator. Lest I be thought to belie your representatives, permit me to burden your thought very briefly with a portion of the record of their wasteful extravagance:

There is no partisanship in "Pork." No one political party has a monopoly of this pernicious abuse of official position. The continual loading of the Rivers and Harbors bill and the Public Buildings bill, with extravagant appropriations for the benefit of local political interests, has become so common as to call forth the condemnation of good citizens of every shade of political allegiance.

The following examples of appropriations wholly or in part for postoffice buildings are taken at random from Public Buildings' bills of recent sessions of Congress. They serve to indicate the wholesale character of this abuse.

Population Approp-
(1910). riation.

Session of 1911:

Devil's Lake, N. D.	5,157	\$139,815
Harrison, Ark.	1,602	94,360
London, Ky.	1,638	96,554
Lander, Wyo.	1,812	109,425

Session of 1914:

Chadron, Neb.	2,687	110,000
Willows, Cal.	1,139	75,000
Fallon, Nev.	741	60,000
Vernal, Utah	836	50,000

Session of 1915:

Grand Canyon, Ariz.	299	25,000
Susanville, Cal.	638	60,000
Mancos, Col.	567	50,000
Brooksville, Fla.	979	100,000
Greenville, Ga.	909	60,000
Halley, Idaho	1,231	100,000
McKee, Ky.	146	75,000
Salyersville, Ky.	310	75,000
Clayton, N. M.	970	125,000
Pembina, N. D.	717	75,000
Franklin, N. C.	379	75,000
Pawnee, Okla.	2,161	200,000
Seneca, S. C.	1,313	100,000
Louisa, Va.	318	50,000
Webster Spgs., W. Va.	500	150,000
Sundance, Wyo.	281	75,000

The callous attitude of the average member of Congress toward this extravagant expenditure of public money for political purposes is aptly expressed by the following quotation from a speech by Congressman J. N.

Garner, of Texas, made at Atacosta, Texas, fair, as reported in an editorial in the New York Evening Post, October 15, 1915:

There are half a dozen places in my district where federal buildings are being erected or have been recently constructed at a cost to the government far in excess of the actual needs of the communities in which they are located. Take Uvalde, my home town, for instance. We are putting up a post office down there at a cost of \$60,000 when a \$5,000 building would be entirely adequate for our needs.

. . . This is mighty bad business for Uncle Sam, and I'll admit it. But the other fellows in Congress have been doing it for a long time and I can't make them quit. Now we Democrats are in charge of the House and I'll tell you right now, every time one of those Yankees gets a ham I'm going to do my best to get a hog.

POSTAL EFFICIENCY?

In the event of public ownership of means of communication, the success of management would depend entirely on postal efficiency. The ever-changing element of political control would, of necessity, be eliminated before success and economy could be assured. It should be entirely clear

to any student of present postal methods of business that the postoffice department is at present disqualified from extending its functions to a larger sphere. Reform in business procedure must be instituted. On this point we are not left without official testimony.

The report of the joint congressional commission of 1907-8 on "Business Methods of the Post Office Department" abounds in lengthy criticism of the methods then in vogue, most of which still remain unchanged.

Then as now, there was no accurate system of accounting. Then as now, the expense of government buildings used for postal purposes, including their upkeep, was not charged to the cost of the service. The salaries of the postmaster general and his assistants and of the auditor for the post office department and his staff; of the deputy attorney general for this department and numerous other expenses, have never been charged to postal expenses.

Concerning the general laxity of business methods, the commission of 1907 says:

"Under such a system a large railroad, commercial or industrial busi-

ness would inevitably go into bankruptcy, and the postoffice department has averted that fate only because the United States treasury has been available to meet deficiencies."—page 5.

Red tape and circumlocution are to be found through the whole organization. The commission says on this point:

"The only safeguard recognized throughout the finance and accounting divisions of the department appears to be that of duplication. If one duplication does not result in reducing or preventing errors, then another entirely fresh set of records is prepared and an entirely different set of clerks are put on to do the whole work over again from the beginning. This duplication undoubtedly arises partly from the inefficiency of many clerks in the particular divisions, but it is mainly due to the want of any proper accounting system under which checks by totals can be made to take the place of the laborious and unnecessary checks by duplication which at present exist."—page 30.

As evidence of the circumlocution in this department, let us review in detail one of the important daily business transactions of the department:

JOURNEY OF A PAY WARRANT.

"The authority for the drawing of a pay warrant is a report for payment

received from the auditor over the signature of the deputy auditor. These reports for payment when received go through the following steps

(1). They are separated according to the treasury depositaries upon whom the warrants are drawn.

(2). The names of the depositaries are stamped on the reports.

(3). Numbers are stamped consecutively for each depositary on the reports for payment.

(4). A daily list of these numbers is sent to the superintendent.

(5). Reports are entered in a separate warrant register for each depositary.

(6). The blank warrants are drawn from the vaults in sheets of 4, and warrants are prepared on the typewriter from the reports and initialed by the clerks preparing them.

(7). Warrants are compared with the reports and done up in bundles, on each of which is placed a facing slip prepared and initialed by the clerk responsible.

(8). Warrants are distributed for signature and the number of warrants sent to each clerk noted in a book entitled "Record of Warrants Distributed." Any officer or employee above the grade of fourth-class clerks is permitted by law to sign warrants. It is the practice of the division to des-

ignate different clerks for this purpose each day.

(9). After signature the warrants are checked off with the book record referred to above, entered in a transit record and sent to the warrant section of the auditor for the postoffice department, accompanied by the reports.

(10). In the auditor's office (warrant section) they are compared with the reports and again registered.

(11). They are then sent to the divisions of the auditor's office, where the reports for payment originated and are checked with the original records of the clerks who prepared these reports.

(12). They are then signed by the deputy auditor, who had also previously signed the reports for payment.

(13). They are next returned to the division of finance, checked with the facing slips, and marked off the transit records.

(14). They are then entered in a record of warrants and sent to the division of postal accounts in the treasurer's office of the treasury department, where the record of warrants is signed by the clerk who takes them to the treasury and by the clerk who receives them at the treasury.

(15). They are registered in the division of postal accounts in the treasury.

(16). They are signed by the assistant treasurer or his representative.

(17). They are then returned to the division of finance which gives a receipt to the treasury clerk for same and examines them to see that they are all returned.

(18). They are then prepared for mailing and entered on record of warrants mailed.

(19). They are finally mailed by an office boy, over whom no supervision is exercised.

"One of the most striking exceptions to ordinary business and accounting principles is that in spite of all these supposed safeguards, the department retains no evidence to substantiate the payments, inasmuch as the reports for payment are returned to the auditor's office, as are also the paid warrants after they are received from the Treasurer of the United States."—Pages 29-30.

This peculiar system is not confined to the United States post office—Australia has a similar one. In the latter country, for example, an application for a new telephone line may be subjected to no less than 32 handlings. The order of procession is:

"Records: Electrical engineer, assistant engineer for lines, inspector for lines, assistant engineer for lines, line foreman, who makes out quanti-

ties, etc., and returns to inspector for lines, assistant engineer for lines, engineer for lines, assistant engineer, electrical engineer who forwards engineering details to the chief electrical engineer for approval; then to records, showing cost, etc., and intimating that the chief electrical engineer has concurred in the engineering particulars. At this stage the file starts on a new tack—to

Senior inspector, district inspector who reports on the probable revenue receivable and the cost of working and returns to the senior inspector, who sends it for approval to the senior clerk who instructs the correspondence branch, whence it is returned to deputy postmaster-general (or the senior clerk, as the case may be) for signature. If the line happens to cost more than £1,000, the file has to go back to records (G. P. O.), thence to central office records, to chief electrical engineer, who makes a recommendation through the chief clerk to the secretary. After decision, it is returned to the chief clerk, who instructs the correspondence branch, where letters are prepared for signature by the chief clerk.

Then the file goes to central office records, for transmission to G. P. O. records, where it is submitted to the senior clerk, who instructs the correspondence branch what to advise, and the people concerned are advised accordingly. The papers then go back to G. P. O. records, where they are decently interred."—Report on man-

agement of the postmaster-general's department, pages 11-12.

The foregoing are but a few examples of world-wide postal inefficiency in business methods. A search of the records of those countries under government ownership fails to show any striking improvement which tends to raise the standard to the level of private business methods.

Until this can be done in this country, any experiments in public ownership, which contemplate enlarging the functions of the postoffice department are likely to prove financially disastrous and disappointing to the public in point of service, if the experience of other countries is any criterion for sober judgment.

Passing without comment the record of losses in operation in government ownership countries, the immediate question arises as to the inherent capacity of our post office department to undertake so large an expansion of public service under its present form of business organization.

Every report of the postmaster general from the foundation of the department to the current year, reveals the fact that he has been sensible of

the difficulties against which the department is struggling incident to political control.

The post office department is still without a modern system of accounting and discrepancies and overlapping in accounts still exist. Above all, the paralyzing influence of politics and the pork barrel is still manifest, regardless of whatever party may be entrusted with the responsibility of the government. Should the American people ultimately decide to undertake the experiment of government ownership of public utilities, they will face certain disaster unless business efficiency be first secured in the one great business department of their government.

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*(Former Editor
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